

Technical Assistance Matters: Schools Need Support to Become Healthier

Evaluation of a national school-based program to address childhood obesity identifies intensive technical assistance as the most critical factor for success

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Childhood obesity threatens the health of our nation's young people and their future potential. Today, more than 23 million children and teens in the United States—nearly one in three young people—are obese or overweight, putting them at risk for high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, asthma, heart disease, and other costly, debilitating conditions that in the past mostly affected adults. If the current trend continues, this generation of young people could be the first in U.S. history to live sicker and die younger than their parents' generation.

In 2006, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation launched the Healthy Schools Program, the nation's most extensive effort to prevent childhood obesity in schools. Today, the Healthy Schools Program, which receives major funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, works with more than 15,000 schools across the nation and reaches more than 9 million students, as well as teachers and other school staff.



As the largest effort of its kind, the Healthy Schools Program has the potential to inform similar efforts to transform schools into healthier places. This brief highlights findings from two peer-reviewed research papers and an evaluation of the first four years of the program that was conducted independently by RMC Research

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Corporation. The evaluation found that schools that accessed and participated in more training and technical assistance made the most progress in implementing policies and programs that support healthy eating and regular physical activity among students. The findings have implications for school-based obesity prevention policies being considered and implemented nationwide.

Healthy Schools Program: Progress in the First Four Years

Schools participating in the Healthy Schools Program during its first four years served students from primarily lower-income families who were at high risk for obesity, including Latino and Black students. In this evaluation, researchers focused on a cohort of 1,309 schools that received technical assistance and had full measurements of progress between 2006 and 2010. They found that 80 percent of those schools made substantial progress toward creating a healthier environment by implementing policies and programs that improved the nutritional value of foods, health education, physical education, and access to physical activity (see box).

The Healthy Schools Program helps schools implement evidence-based policies and programs that promote healthy eating and physical activity in eight key areas:

1. **School Policies and Systems.** Policies and practices related to student nutrition and physical activity, such as keeping school grounds open after hours and establishing a school wellness council.
2. **School Meals.** Efforts to improve the nutritional quality of meals, including offering whole grains daily or serving at least one low-fat entrée choice at lunch.
3. **Competitive Foods and Beverages.** Efforts to improve the nutritional quality of foods and beverages sold or served outside of school meals, such as more nutritious snacks and beverages in vending machines.
4. **Physical Activity.** Opportunities for daily physical activity outside of physical education class time on the playground, during the school day, or in extracurricular activities.
5. **Health Education.** Standards-based instruction that teaches students the knowledge and skills necessary to adopt healthy eating and regular physical activity as a part of their lifestyles.
6. **Physical Education.** Standards-based instruction focused on keeping kids active for the majority of class time and building their lifelong fitness skills.
7. **Before- and After-School Programs.** Infusing physical activity and healthy eating opportunities into all before- and after-school program offerings.
8. **Employee Wellness.** Programs developed to help teachers and staff become healthy role models for their students. Programs can include fitness and nutritional counseling.

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Since joining the Healthy Schools Program, the schools in the study made significant progress in improving the health of their school environments. Specifically:

- **Fifty-six percent of schools improved the nutritional value of the foods served as a part of school lunch and breakfast.** For example, some schools started serving more fruits and vegetables. Others got rid of deep-frying equipment and started to offer baked potato strips instead of French fries.
- **Forty-one percent of schools implemented new programs and policies to help students be more active.** Some schools offered quick fitness breaks during class, and many offered students opportunities for physical activity before and after school at no cost. For example, some schools started a before-school walking club to teach students the importance of regular physical activity.
- **Forty-four percent of schools enhanced their physical education programs.** Schools revamped the curriculum to ensure students were more active during physical education.
- **Fifty-eight percent of schools established an employee wellness program to help staff to model healthy eating and physical activity behaviors for students.** Some schools acquired donated equipment and turned unused spaces into fitness rooms available to students, teachers, and staff.

Notably, schools that served students from lower-income families and students at high risk for obesity were just as likely, and in some cases, more likely to adopt health-promoting policies as schools that served students from higher-income families.

Keys to Creating a Healthy School: Training and Technical Assistance

The evaluation also revealed factors that helped hasten schools' efforts to create healthier environments. Specifically, the evaluation suggests that:

- Technical assistance and training for staff is an important marker for success.
- The dose of technical assistance and training is uniquely associated with progress—not simply a school's length of participation in the program. Through the Healthy Schools Program, all schools have access to training in the form of more than 800 different resources and eight topical toolkits at no cost. However, the evaluation findings suggest schools that access more technical assistance make the most progress.
- Findings also suggest that more intensive training, such as one-on-one assistance from a program expert, is significantly associated with schools making meaningful changes, such as altering purchasing patterns to buy more nutritious food at a reasonable price.

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- Schools cited budget cuts, time constraints, and accountability demands as common obstacles to implementing healthier policies. However, the evaluators found that the Healthy Schools Program helped school leaders find creative ways to support healthy eating and regular physical activity for students and staff.

Promising Indications of Changes in Children's Health

According to the evaluation, there are promising indications that when schools implement the Healthy Schools Program, students' weight, diet, and physical activity improve. In a sample of 21 randomly selected schools participating in the Healthy Schools Program, the evaluators surveyed children in grades 5 through 12 about their diet and physical activity, and measured their body mass index (BMI).¹ Findings include:

- Elementary and middle school children drank significantly fewer sugar-sweetened beverages in the 2009-2010 school year than in the 2007-2008 school year.
- All students reported spending more time in physical education in 2009-2010 than in 2007-2008.
- Children's average BMI decreased significantly between 2007-2008 and 2009-2010, and decreases were found primarily among middle school students.
- Decreases were similar for both genders and across ethnic groups.
- Schools that improved their competitive food and beverage policies saw the largest declines in average BMI.
- Students who reduced their sugar-sweetened beverage consumption reduced their BMI more than other children.

Building Healthier Schools in the Future

Evaluation results suggest the Healthy Schools Program training and technical assistance framework helps schools to adopt policies and programs that will help to address the childhood obesity epidemic. Such changes could have a lasting impact on the health and development of millions of children for years to come. The evaluation found that 80 percent of schools participating in the Healthy Schools Program have made progress. It also indicates that, in order to continue to make progress, schools need technical assistance or training to make policy and program changes. Healthy Schools Program

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evaluation findings corroborate previous studies that indicate the importance of technical assistance and training in school policy and program change in this area. This is an important finding for policy-makers at all levels of government who are working to implement healthier school policies: requirements and funding are not enough—training is a key component to ensuring success.

Key Takeaways

- Schools can make changes aimed at creating a healthier environment regardless of the student population they serve.
- Technical assistance matters, and it hastens the implementation of key school-based practices and policies to encourage regular physical activity and better nutrition over time.
- When schools implement the Healthy Schools Program successfully, schools can positively impact students' weight and eating behaviors.
- Schools across the country have designed innovative and low-cost strategies for promoting healthy eating and regular physical activity while maintaining their focus on academic achievement.

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation works to address one of the nation's leading public health threats—childhood obesity. The goal of the Alliance is to reduce the nationwide prevalence of childhood obesity by 2015, and to empower kids nationwide to make healthy lifestyle choices. Founded in 2005 by the American Heart Association and the William J. Clinton Foundation, the Alliance works to positively affect the places that can make a difference to a child's health: homes, schools, doctors' offices, and communities.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and health care, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, measureable, and timely change. For 40 years the Foundation has brought experience, commitment, and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, the Foundation expects to make a difference in your lifetime. For more information, visit www.rwjf.org. Follow the Foundation on Twitter www.rwjf.org/twitter or Facebook www.rwjf.org/facebook.

¹ 17 additional schools were invited to participate but refused to do so either because of the burden of participation in the study or because their human subjects review process took too long to allow data collection. Student response rates were over 80 percent.